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Talking with Marie (Santos) Graham

August 1991

I lived all my life in Jenner, grew up on the Island. I wasn't born there but rather at the State Park by Goat Rock. There were some houses over there when I was born 76 years ago.

Q: Tell me about school. Where did you attend and how long?

A: Right here, eight years. We went to school, rain or shine, we went to school. Our older brother and sister rowed us across the river every school day. I started school when I was six, seventy years ago. I'm proud of my age.

Q: After eighth grade you were still a young girl. What did you do then?

A: We didn't go to high school because they would have to farm us out in Santa Rosa and my folks didn't believe in that.

Q: Were there any crafts handed down in your family? Did you do hand work or pottery?

A: No, nothing special. We went into the hills gathering wild flowers, went to the beach and studied sea lions. We went on picnics. It was a good childhood.

Q: What else?

A: Farming work. We milked cows, pulled weeds, fed the pigs and chickens. My father was a truck farmer so there were always weeds to pull in the garden. We raised vegetables which he took to Monte Rio nd Guerneville in his truck and sold them right off the truck. He went fishing, too. He caught them! He knew how to catch fish. That was our living, the truck farm, the dairy and the fishing. He used to peddle fish.

Q: What did you do when anyone became ill?

A: WE never got sick. Never went to the doctor or for check-ups. They didn't do that in them days. If we stepped on a nail, my father put some liniment on it. WE just never were sick, oh, we had the flu sometimes but never had to go to a doctor.

Q: Let's go back to your beginning. Where did your parents come from?

A: My dad came from Guam. His mother put him on a boat when he was fifteen. When he got to Alaska he jumped off, made himself scarce. Gradually he made his way ~~down~~ the coast and landed in Jenner and that's where we lived. If you were to ask what nationality we are, we were mongrels?

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Q: ~~Mongrels?~~ Your mother? What about her origins?

A: She came from Napa. She was a descendent of the Miwok Indian Tribe.

(While Marie smiled when she called herself a mongrel, she is correct in that she was of mixed blood. By definition, a mongrel is "of mixed breed, race, origin or character." By 1930 there were only three pure-blood Miwoks among them. The Miwok Coast Indians were a small population, around 1,500 persons going back to 1851.

The Cost Miwok territory centered in Marin and adjacent Sonoma Counties, Western or Bodega and Southrern Marin. Although there was no overall tribal organization, in a large village there would be a headman but if settlements were grouped into meaningful clusters, these have not been recorded.

Several well-known-place-names in the area derive from Coast Miwok: Cotati, Olema, Tamalpais, Tomales, Marin and Novato.

The early Indians lived by resources diversified and suited to an economy based on fishing, hunting and gathering. Deer and crab were available all year. Nuts, seeds and acorns were stored. There was an abundance of wild geese, salmon, and kelp. By 1946 early years of American exploitation focused on lumbering, dairying and agriculture and some of the few surviving Miwoks found work in saw mills and fields.

Their dwellings were conical buillt on a frame of two forked interlocking poles of willow or driftwood with grass, rush or tule tied to the frame. In rainy weather it was covered with sealskin. There was a central hearth. The buildings were located adjacent to shore, lagoon or slough.

In their religion there was song, ritual fasting, continence and prayer.

For more about the Coastal Miwok or the Miwok Indians of California, refer to THE HANDBOOK OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS VIII by William C. Sturtevant.)

Q: About the weather. Have you seen some changes?

A: I think so. I think it was warmer, on the island we needed very little heat. All winter long we heated with just the cooking stove. I think it has changed. We didn't have fog like we've been having, this year especially.

Q: Now in your adult years, how did you meet your husband?

A: I was cooking for Bridgehven Restaurant and he was working on a ranch out there. That's where we met, at Bridgehaven. " Get a man through the stomach", they say. We would have been married fifty years

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but he died in an accident on his vehicle when we had been married 33 years. You learn to get along. My kids helped me through it.

Q: About education opportunities, did the young people go to high school?

A: Those that could afford it, could afford to board the kids in Santa Rosa. We couldn't afford that and when the bus finally came to Jenner, we were already grown. I have always lived out here except for a time when I lived in Benicia. That was country then so I have never lived in a city.. I wouldn't want to. When people ask me why I live here I tell them that it is peaceful and quiet and I wouldn't live anywhere else. Bill built my house for me and I'm going to live in it. I raised my two children here. My husband was in the army twice and I was left here with the children, the baby only ten months.

Q: Let's talk a bit about transportation.

A: My father had one of the first ford pick-up trucks. He would leave it on the shore. Nobody bothered it in those days. Everything was safe. You didn't even have to lock your doors. When my father passed away in 1941 he had just bought a new pick-up. He paid \$500 dollars for it. Look at them now!

Q: When you moved away, who was on the Islnd?

A: My mother was there until 1943 when Bill (son) was three months old, when she died.

Q: And your husband's parents?

A: They're from Arkansas. We visited there lost of times. We went on Highway 66, which is not there anymore. We did some traveling on vacations.

Q: Tell me, how is it that Jenner has never gottten built up more?

A: We all liked it peaceful and quiet. We never had any problems. There were motorcyclists that came through but they never bothered anyone until the misfits came through. In the sixties there were a lot of those but that has changed again. Those years we kept the doors locked and now I keep them locked all the time since the murder off the highway.

After I married I did not have to work away from home. I took care of the children and kept houe. I have always canned. I should be home now since I have apples and cucumbers to can. My brothr has diabetes so I don't can as much as I used to and the kids are gone. I'm a great grandmother twice already.

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Q: How did you come to live on the island and then own it?

A: My father inherited it from two old fellows who owned it. He took care of them when they were down and out so they just left it to him. However, my father more or less bought it because he paid all their bills. They were two brothers named Penny. Later when the folks were gone we got it and sold it and the State bought it from the people who bought it from us. It now belongs to the public.

There were people who wanted to do something at the harbor and bring in some business. But who would want fisheries in Jenner? Though it sounded good at the time, now I just don't know. They had wanted to haul out gravel but they ended up just dredging the mouth of the river. What they had tried to do was get rights to haul out the gravel and take it to San Francisco.

Q: They did not do it then because of the opposition?

A: Oh, I just don't know. I like it the way it is. (More about the family)

There were five of us in my family. Three brothers and one sister. Josephine was a half sister and the one that lived with me was a half sister. I took care of her until they amputated her leg.

Q: What about religious education?

A: Well, all we had was Sunday School in the summer. They pitched a tent in Jenner behind the restaurant. That's about it. We went to Sunday School when we were kids. In Jenner there was no place for that, they wouldn't allow it at school.

Q: Do you remember the days when there was lumbering here and the infirmary was used, the long building on Willig?

A: No, that was before my time, (before 1915). I remember them floating logs down, once, but that's about it. The infirmary was already gone as far as I knew. People lived in that building. Our school teacher lived there.

(Marie went on to tell about the building of 10514 Willig, across from her and confirmed that Jenner during her childhood was much like it is today. She said, "The people of Jenner built the firehouse and the community club. It cost us hardly anything. We had bake sales, dances and raised money and the locals did the work. I'm a little uncertain if there was some help building the community center but I am sure we built the firehouse. We had lots of flower sales and bake sales. I baked for those a lot. Now the only fund raiser is the fair. In the old days we used to have dances. We started out at Duncan Mills behind the store. Then we had dances in Jenner. There was some talk of building a tennis court but that never happened. There is not much for the children to do.